Furniture, Headdresses, Tools –

Insights into Comprehensive Museological Work on Object Terminology

Gitta Böth and Manfred Hartmann

Museums are scientific institutions. Science mainly manifests itself – at least in many German museums – in research results which form the basis for exhibitions, for educational programs, etc. With our work on object terminology we however do basic work which provides assistance to the museum staff who record and scientifically document the collection. This work is not very effective in regard to publicity or public relation and therefore it leads in many museums – if at all – only a shadow existence.

Germany is a country whose language and vocabulary are influenced by many regional dialects; one term may have completely different meanings. We bring forward the clear conceptualization of museum objects by linguistic terms and describe their contents. This creates the basis for a multilingualism which a multicultural society urgently needs. It is also a tool for work on the German version of the Art & Architecture Thesaurus (AAT).

Terminological control ensures communication. It supports the scientific study of museum objects and it allows similar research results. But it is not easy to bring words and objects together considering different scientific and regional origins.

While describing objects museum people have to deal with different depths of indexing. In this lecture we have focused on different aspects of how terms are specified. The UK Museum Documentation Standard SPECTRUM[1] only roughly outlines how a term has to be: it is used in the singular form, selected from a standard list or from a pool of terms, used as a specific or a general term, etc.

In a museum people have to deal with a particular type of problem. The potential variety of objects in a collection is reflective, so to speak, of the whole world; the objects added to the collection are often torn out of their context or they are

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[1] See SPECTRUM 3.1. The UK Museum Documentation Standard. Deutsche erweiterte Fassung (= Materialien aus dem Institut für Museumsforschung, special 5). Berlin 2013. On the Web: <http://www.ag-sammlungsmanagement.de/> [accessed on 6th June 2014].

incomplete (fragmented). In addition the limitation of our own knowledge increases the problem.

Beside assistance for identification we need terminological control, which means linguistic concordance of the term denominating similar objects. After the identification and description of the object it is systematically classified. All this is part of responsible scientific work on the object and safeguards the task of the museum.

Against this background the file of generic terms, in German "Oberbegriffsdatei", abbreviated OBG, was developed as a product of a kind of self-help group for users of the object documentation software HiDA. This software has been promoted by the State Office for Non-governmental Museums in Bavaria since the late 1980s / early 1990s; at the same time a working party of registrars using HiDA was established, which soon members from other German states joined.

The word generic term was taken from HiDA application. The first product provided by the working group was the so-called generic terms list for HiDA: a hierarchy of up to seven levels that could be read into the database. Definitions and illustrations still were missing.

The OBG was based on the inventory of real existing museum collections which meant that some object groups were over-represented, while others did not occur. After a general revision in which such gaps were closed the OBG file nowadays has about 4.000 descriptors.

As work progressed the OBG was gradually extended: The descriptor and the systematical classification were complemented by extended definitions which enlarged the OBG in the direction of support for easier identification.

If possible we try to classify according to the form or shape of the objects. In the OBG, for example, the descriptor is "cup" and not "coffee cup". Nevertheless we do not totally exclude the function; but it is not the first criterion of attribution.

Sometimes we have to deal with combinations which are difficult to separate. Form follows function – writing furniture for example is constructed to write on it. Form and function depend on each other. Therefore we have favored the functional term instead of a made-up word. This pragmatic approach is painful to the thesaurus

specialists. But we think pragmatism is good as long as we do not disregard the actual standards of knowledge – and we put a great deal of effort into this.

The proof of the success of our approach can be seen in those currently using our system, such as the German Historic Museum in Berlin, as well as our publications: Four of them are published in form of books, concerning watches, vessels, furniture and headdresses.[2] Another example is the thesaurus of weapons which was finished in 1996: it was distributed as typescripts and will soon be printed. Two volumes of the archaeological series "Bestimmungsbuch Archäologie" follow the example of our typologies.[3] The OBG file is available on the internet in addition to other thesauri, classifications, word lists, etc.[4]

We would like to illustrate how the hierarchical word list is expanded with a definition and synonyms, i.e. words with the same or similar meaning. Our example – the chaise longue – was taken from the typology of furniture.

An illustration is added to the text; in many cases we have made line drawings. Structural attributes or features can reveal themselves more easily in line drawings than on the basis of photographs. By the way we have also included commonly used terms that are not allowed to be used.

The data acquisition is web-based; we use the program xTree which was developed in Schleswig-Holstein. Now the vocabulary can be edited by any internet-enabled workstation; this will also facilitate the preparations for the publications of our typologies. The book has a value of its own because of the close connection between text and illustrations. Digital and analog exist in parallel.

Before we look at the current work we would like to report briefly on our OBG working group. It looks back on almost 25 years of history with changing members. Coordinator and eldest member is Viktor Pröstler, member of staff of the State Office

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[2] See Viktor Pröstler: Callwey's Handbuch der Uhrentypen. Von der Armbanduhr bis zum Zappler. München 1994; Werner Endres: Gefäße und Formen. Eine Typologie für Museen und Sammlungen (= MuseumsBausteine, vol. 3). München 1996; Gitta Böth et al.: Möbel. Eine Typologie für Museen und Sammlungen (= MuseumsBausteine, vol. 8; Materialien aus dem Westfälischen Museumsamt, vol. 3). München, Berlin 2005; Gitta Böth et al.: Kopfbedeckungen. Eine Typologie für Museen und Sammlungen (= MuseumsBausteine, vol. 15; Materialien aus dem Westfälischen Museumsamt, vol. 6). Berlin 2013.
[3] See Ronald Heynowski: Fibeln erkennen – bestimmen – beschreiben (= Bestimmungsbuch Archäologie, vol. 1). Berlin, München 2012; Ulrike Weller: Äxte und Beile Fibeln erkennen – bestimmen – beschreiben (= Bestimmungsbuch Archäologie, vol. 2). Berlin, München 2014.
[4] On the Web: <http://museum.zib.de/museumsvokabular> [accessed on 6th June 2014].

for Non-governmental Museums in Bavaria which is located in Munich. Normally eight to ten people with different scientific background meet up to four times a year in various German museums.

The intense encounters in our group create a special culture of discussion. Although meetings are not always harmonious, they are always productive. We would like to exemplify this using the example of bonnets in general (Haube) and bonnets belonging to traditional costumes (Trachtenhaube). Bonnets are a topic we had to deal with while preparing our typology of headdresses. The question was whether bonnets form their own category or whether bonnets by reasons of the different forms had to be classified into the categories "hat" or "cap". Regional differences in clothing, the variety of regional or even local traditional costumes as well as the general change of significance of dress make it impossible to give a precise definition. This difficulty is impressively demonstrated by the 213 German names for bonnets enumerated by Hans-Friedrich Foltin in 1963.[5] After a long discussion the so-called "War of the Bonnets" ended, the OBG group decided to broach the issue and to include some basic types of bonnets under the generic term "Trachtenhaube", i.e. hoods belonging to traditional and occupational costumes.

Towards the end of the work on headdresses the OBG group had already started the development of a typology of tools. We specify the category "tool" as those tools which are operated by hand and used for working on or for processing material or objects, for repairing or finishing them. Unfortunately we could not refer to the standardization of DIN, which is the German institute of standardization. The Tools and Clamping Devices Standards Committee normalizes only on request.[6] The different departments are highly specialized; they see their task in promoting the interests of German tool manufacturer in the international market.

For us the elaborations of standards committees are helpful in gathering vocabulary, in compiling word lists and in recording current product names. However they do not cover the complete range of objects. We have to do our own research. We have to systematize the variety of objects and to supplement it with illustrative material for the sake of scientifically trained people as well as interested laypersons.

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[5] See Hans-Friedrich Foltin: Die Kopfbedeckungen und ihre Bezeichnungen im Deutschen (= Beiträge zur deutschen Philologie, vol. 26). Diss. Marburg 1961, Gießen 1963, pp. 195–198.
[6] See DIN: Normenausschuss Werkzeuge und Spannzeuge. Wirken an den Schlüsselstellen. Berlin 2008, n. p.

We started our work on the topic "tool" as we start any research: We viewed the existing material, compiled the current stage of research as well as literature and further records. Our first aim was to establish a systematical structure which can be further developed. This will possibly result in limiting ourselves more sensibly to specific categories of tools. This is desirable because almost all of us carry out our work on the OBG only in addition to our "proper" museum work. Thus it always takes a lot of time to present results of the OBG work. For all of us concrete results are an important motivation to continue working on the typology.

The section in the OBG is headed "tool, device"; 105 terms are subordinated starting with "Abdreheisen" (trimming/turning tool) and ending with "Zubehör" (accessories). 41 of these have subdivisions which are further broken down to some extent. Some of the terms have already been defined. The existing definitions have to be examined; we have to prove whether they follow the form and whether the description gives an image of the object which allows the user to identify and classify it. We need to clarify and often have to re-define under formal aspects.

In order to obtain a broad knowledge of the wide variety of tools we evaluate the current as well as the older craft literature, such as classic template books for practice of the 19th century. Historic and current primary sources complete the study of specialist literature – therefore we also work with encyclopedias, technical journals und magazines, pattern book, sales catalogs, etc.

Generally we cannot refer to the classic German printed sources available for museum accessioning and inventory. Many books may help us to find terms and to create word lists, but they do not help us to define objects and bring them into systematical order.

Even the publications of university research into crafts cannot be used in most cases. However, the exception proves the rule. One example is the thesis of Maria-Luise Reitz.[7] She describes the basic equipment of a milliner, she explains individual steps of work – thus in combination with illustrations the reader gets an idea of tools, which are used for producing and garnishing hats, caps and bonnets.

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[7] See Maria-Luise Reitz-Töller: Die Putzmacherin. Ein weibliches Handwerk (= Studien zur Volkskultur in Rheinland-Pfalz, vol. 24). Mainz 1998, pp. 48–64.

Helpful for the planning of our work was Hinrich Siuts' extensive book on rural and craft implements in Westphalia.[8] Concerning tools he distinguishes between "basic tools such as hammers, pliers and saws"[9] and individual tools and equipment used by rural craftsmen. Both parts are combined with a lot of illustrative plates, mainly excellent drawings which can even point out small differences. We adopted this approach in a modified way. On the one hand we edit the so-called basic tools. On the other hand we add the specialized tools of specific handicrafts.

So the next publication will probably be limited to the basic types of the tools. We have already worked on and have even revised the term "planer" and its subdivisions. We have defined all previously listed planers; some more have been found which have to be added and defined. In addition we have already recorded illustrations – this also helps us getting an idea of the diversity and the differences of planers.

Special themes – such as hammer, pliers or axe and hatchet – are being prepared by individual members of the OBG group right now. They create word lists, propose the structure of systematization, make suggestions for definitions and look for illustrations and templates for drawings. This is an attempt to shorten the long processing time. The discussion in the OBG working party will provide a common result which hopefully can be published soon.

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[8] See Hinrich Siuts: Bäuerliche und handwerkliche Arbeitsgeräte in Westfalen. Die alten Geräte der Landwirtschaft und des Landhandwerks 1890–1930 (= Schriften der Volkskundlichen Kommission für Westfalen, vol. 26). Münster 1982.
[9] Ibid., p. 219. Translated from German into English.